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# GENIUS AS AN INNATE MENTAL TALENT OF IDEA-GIVING IN CHINESE PAINTING AND KANT



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## *Introduction*

According to the Song critic Guo Ruoxu (ca. 1080), the last five laws by Xie He (active 500–535?) are “open to study,” while *qiyun* 氣韻 (spirit consonance) “necessarily involves an innate knowledge; it assuredly cannot be secured through cleverness or close application, nor will time aid its attainment. It is an unspoken accord, a spiritual communion; ‘something that happens without one’s knowing how’” (Bush and Shih 2012, p. 95; Yu 1986, p. 59).<sup>1</sup> For Guo Ruoxu, although the *qiyun* within a work refers to the quality of a painting and cannot be identical with the *qiyun* of the artist, the ability to produce a painting replete with *qiyun* is determined by the painter’s innate mental disposition. This idea has been echoed by later artists and critics.

Guo Ruoxu’s stress on painting as the “mind-print” of the artist and the innate mental talent that determines whether a work is replete with *qiyun* reminds one of Kant’s account of genius. For Kant, only genius can create beautiful artwork (*KU* 5:307).<sup>2</sup> He defines genius as “the inborn predisposition of the mind through which nature gives the rule to art” (*KU* 5:307). He explains the innate mental talent further in terms of spirit as “the animating principle of the mind,” which “is nothing other than the faculty for the presentation of aesthetic ideas” (*KU* 5:313–314). Can we explain innate mental talent in the context of classical Chinese painting along Kantian lines, in terms of genius as the innate mental talent of idea-giving?<sup>3</sup>

Scholars have noted that *yi* 意 and *shen* 神 in the classical Chinese artistic context appear to be the counterparts of Kant’s aesthetic idea and spirit, respectively. Yu-kung Kao (1991, pp. 66, 87) borrows Kant’s term “aesthetic idea” to refer to the *yi* (idea) in Chinese literature established in the mind of an artist and later released into the work, and defines the *shen* (spirit) of the Chinese artist as “the artist’s genius in creating an impression or an idea and transmitting this idea through this art.”<sup>4</sup> Karl-Heinz Pohl (2006, p. 130) echoes Kao’s claim, suggesting that the use of “*shen* (spirit) or *shen si* (spiritual thinking, i.e. imagination)” in Lu Ji’s (261–303) and Liu Xie’s (465–522) texts appears consistent with the role Kant gives to spirit in creating aesthetic ideas. Pohl (2006, p. 134) also sees a correspondence

between the synonym of *yi*, *yijing* 意境 (“roughly ‘artistic idea’”) in Chinese poetry criticism and Kant’s aesthetic idea.<sup>5</sup>

The following discussion will examine correspondences between two pairs of terms in classical Chinese painting and in Kant’s account. First, I will establish parallels between pictorial *yi* (along with *yixiang*, *yijing*) and Kant’s aesthetic idea, and between the *shen* that animates *yi* and Kant’s spirit animating the aesthetic idea. Second, I will consider some differences between *yi* and Kant’s aesthetic idea, *shen* and Kant’s spirit, that appear to challenge the efficacy of projecting Kant’s approach into the Chinese context.

By introducing the notions of the aesthetic idea and the spirit, Kant explains how genius as an innate mental talent works for idea-giving, which is significant in artistic creation (*KU* 5:307, 314). When attempting to apply Kant’s terms in the classical Chinese artistic context, even if *yi* corresponded to the aesthetic idea, and *shen* to the spirit, we cannot say that the two aspects of *yi* preceding the brush and *shen* stimulating *yi* determine that the artist will create a work replete with *qiyun*. Even Kant does not suggest that if an artist has the ideal mental talent of idea-giving, he would create a beautiful work. Ignoring this may cause the reader to misunderstand my aim in this article, which is to point out plausible parallels between these two distinctive approaches and some problems raised by borrowing Kant’s terms to illuminate how the innate mental state of a gifted classical Chinese artist works for idea-giving in artistic creation.

### *The Idea-giving of Genius in the Context of Classical Chinese Painting*

In this section, I will explore the parallels between *yi* and Kant’s aesthetic idea, and *shen* and Kant’s spirit, before discussing differences between the two approaches.

#### *Parallels between Pictorial Yi and Kant’s Aesthetic Idea*

According to Kant, the aesthetic idea is a “representation of the imagination,” in contrast to the rational idea; when aesthetic ideas are aroused, the mind is moved to soar freely over “an immeasurable field of related representation” (*KU* 5:314–316). Aesthetic ideas are expressed through an artwork by genius (an innate mental disposition), and communicated to audiences, and the beauty of art lies in “the expression of aesthetic ideas” (*KU* 5:320). The aesthetic idea in the work appears to refer to the expressive content of the work. Apparently similarly, in Yu-kung Kao’s (1991, p. 66) discussion of *yi* in poetry, *yi* (idea) as an internalized symbol (of the object depicted) is associated with the inner image in the artist’s mind, and the idea-associated image is released into the final work.<sup>6</sup> However, his translation of *yi* in classical Chinese texts on painting as “intent” or “meaning” seems mistaken (Kao 1991, pp. 85, 88). I suggest instead that

there are two similarities between *yi* in classical Chinese painting and Kant's aesthetic idea. First, the association of *yi* with *xiang* (image) is analogous to Kant's association of aesthetic idea with aesthetic attribute. Second, like the aesthetic idea, pictorial *yi* is not a rational idea (strategy, intention or meaning).

*First similarity.* Classical texts on Chinese painting provide evidence of the first similarity, between the relationship of *yi* and *xiang* and that of the aesthetic idea and the aesthetic attribute. The Song master Guo Xi (1000–1090) illustrates the significance of establishing *yi* and *xiang* in the painter's mind through an analogy with Chinese lute-making (see [Bush and Shih 2012](#), pp. 157–158; [Yu 1986](#), p. 640). His text suggests that if an artist's mind is in a state of clarity, it might easily grasp the idea, and let the perfect mental image appear in front of his mind's eye. However, when his mind is in a state of confusion and ideas are confused, it is impossible to see the clear mental image. Guo Xi's contemporary and later artists' and critics' discussion of the perfect (mental) image established preceding the brush echoes his text. For example, Su Shi (1037–1101) suggests the artist should learn from Wen Tong (1019–1079), who formulates a perfect mental image of the bamboo before painting it ([Bush and Shih 2012](#), p. 207; [Yu 1986](#), p. 1026). Similarly, Dong You (active early twelfth century) believes that, for a painter painting horses, when the mental image of the horse has been engraved in one's mind, "a true horse will emerge" on the paper or silk ([Bush and Shih 2012](#), p. 216). The act of painting only demands that the painter release the mental image onto the silk or paper without the hindrance of looking at the object by "following the course from the mind to the hand" ([Gao 1996](#), p. 156). The Yuan critic Tang Hou (active 1320–1330) echoes that the difficulty of depicting a landscape cannot be overcome "unless there are hills and valleys . . . as expansive as immeasurable waves" in the painter's mind ([Bush and Shih 2012](#), p. 248).

Although Song and Yuan artists and critics do not use the term *yixiang* in texts on painting, the Qing critic Fang Xun (1736–1799) explicitly associates *yi* preceding the brush with the inner image (*xiang*) in the painter's mind:

The ancients made painting in the way of "*yi* preceding the brush." Du Fu was said to paint a rock for ten days and water for five days. He did not mean to [spend five or ten days on wielding the brush and ink] and then complete a rock or water. The verses mean that one should first [take time to] build [idea-images] (*yixiang*) in the mind, to have mountains and valleys in the breast; then one can naturally attain swift brushwork. ([Gao 1996](#), p. 154, with modifications; [Yu 1986](#), pp. 232–233)

That is, when brilliant *yi* emerges in the artist's mind, clear *xiang* (image) is believed to correspondingly and simultaneously appear in front of his mind's eye. Having noted the relationship of *yi* and *xiang* in classical texts on

Chinese painting, we can move on to the comparison with Kant's account: *yi* and *xiang* appear analogous to Kant's aesthetic idea and aesthetic attribute.

Although Kant does not use the term "image" explicitly, the mental image is accommodated in his discussion of aesthetic attribute and aesthetic idea: by furnishing "a multitude of related representations" through the imagination, aesthetic attributes "yield an aesthetical idea, which serves that idea of reason instead of logical presentation" (*KU* 5:315). Kant gives this example of an aesthetic attribute: "Jupiter's eagle, with the lightning in its claws, is an attribute of the powerful king of heaven, as is the peacock of the splendid queen of heaven" (*KU* 5:315). Thus an aesthetic attribute appears to be a symbolic mental image, a signifier of the aesthetic idea. "Ideas of reason, such as God or infinity, we can think, but not perceive. Aesthetic ideas, as in good works of art, we can perceive, but not fully grasp . . . . [A genius] can create an object for us to perceive that fits an idea of reason in symbolic ways" (Wenzel 2006, p. 103). Since an aesthetic idea is perceived in a symbolic way, it is inseparable from aesthetic attribute.

As discussed above, when the idea (*yi*) is established in the artist's mind, the clear mental image (the lute in Guo Xi's text, the bamboo in Su Shi's text, the horse in Dong You's text, the landscape in Tang Hou's and Fang Xun's texts) that reflects or lodges the idea is expected to be released from the artist's mind into the work; if confused ideas and ambiguous images still haunt his mind, the artist will not be able to produce good work. The relationship between *yi* and *xiang* shows that as "the moldable substance in the [artist's] mind," *yi* refers to "the idea at the moment when it is ready to be presented in its final artistic form," as if an aesthetic idea, on the brink of presentation, is associated with an 'image' [*xiang* 象] in the mind. In this sense *yi* is the internal symbol before its manifestation" (Kao 1991, p. 66). Although Yu-kung Kao only discusses this in relation to literature, in view of the relationship between *yi* and *xiang* examined above, the analogy of *yi* in painting with the aesthetic idea appears plausible. When borrowing the "aesthetic idea" to refer to *yi* in literature, Yu-kung Kao implies that the mental image (*xiang*) refers to the aesthetic attribute. As seen above, the analogy of *xiang* in painting with the aesthetic attribute also looks plausible.

Since Kant's aesthetic idea as a representation of the imagination is perceived in a symbolic way, Michael McGhee (2000, p. 105) interprets the aesthetic idea as mental image: "An aesthetic idea is a particular representation of the imagination. In other words, it is an image, an image with evocative power, an image which carries some of the charge of the universal even in its particularity." McGhee's equating the aesthetic idea with the image reminds us of the term *yixiang* (idea-image) used in Fang Xun's writing on painting cited above, and especially favored by modern and contemporary Chinese aestheticians. Since the idea (*yi*) perceived is embodied and lodged in the mental image and released into the final image

of the work, it sounds reasonable for Fang Xun and modern critics to prefer to use the term *yixiang* to refer to the internalized expressive symbol that appears in front of the painter's mind's eye and is later released into the work, and can then be imagined by the audience.

On the one hand, although my initial aim is testing the efficacy of applying Kant's aesthetic idea to interpreting the *yi* established in the mind of the Chinese artist, the Chinese term *yixiang* throws a light on McGhee's interpretation of the aesthetic idea as mental image, since the aesthetic idea is always associated with the aesthetic attribute and can only be perceived by imagination rather than being thought and fully grasped. Although for Kant the aesthetic attribute is more like a visual image or symbol, which furnishes the aesthetic idea, the aesthetic idea together with the aesthetic attribute constitute the intuitive representation of an imagination with evocative power. On the other hand, the analogy between *yixiang* and the aesthetic idea also throws a light on the modern theory of *yijing* initially proposed by Wang Guowei, to which I will turn very soon.

*Second similarity.* According to Kant, we think the rational idea rather than perceive it, while the aesthetic idea is perceived and expressed in the artwork through genius. Different from the rational idea, the aesthetic idea as an intuitive representation of the imagination cannot even "be completely compassed and made intelligible by language" (Pohl 2006, p. 132). As argued above, pictorial *yi* is perceived in the mind and associated with the mental image, and later is released into the image of the final work. We can see another similarity: neither Chinese pictorial *yi* nor Kant's aesthetic idea is a rational concept or conception.

One might question my argument, claiming that *yi* preceding the brush can be understood as intention or strategy or plan.<sup>7</sup> For instance, Xiongbo Shi (2018, pp. 871, 876, 880–881) employs two main categories of *yi* classified by Zhang Dainian and argues that *yi* preceding the brush in calligraphy can refer to the artist's intention. In calligraphy, Wang Xizhi (321–379) suggests that *yi* preceding the brush requires calligraphers to formulate the strategy for realizing the intention of "fighting with the medium," "achieving an effect within a particular time and space," and lodging the mental image into the work (Gao 1996, p. 153). In the case of painting, it is also important for a painter to take time to contemplate the motif and consider the strategy for composition before wielding his brush. For instance, the Yuan critic Rao Ziran (active ca. 1340) indicates that formulating the motif and strategic plan before painting is essential to avoid the faults of "overcrowded compositions" and of "scenes without levels and risings" (Bush and Shih 2012, pp. 266–267; Yu 1986, pp. 691–692).

However, it should be stressed that intention or strategy or plan is not the key point emphasized by classical painters and critics. After observing the painting process of the master Zhang Zao (active in the late eighth century), the Tang critic Fu Zai (813) comments that "[Zhang Zao's] *ideas*

reach into the dark mysteries of things, and for [Zhang Zao], things lay not in the physical senses, but in *the spiritual part of his mind*. And thus he was able to grasp them in his [mind], and make his hand accord with it” (Bush and Shih 2012, p. 85, my emphasis; Yu 1986, p. 20). Similarly, as the Tang critic Zhang Yanyuan (847) applauds, Wu Daozi’s (ca. 680–759) art perfectly illustrates “what was described as formulating [*yi*] before using the brush, so that, when the painting is finished [*yi*] is present” (Bush and Shih 2012, p. 62, with modifications; Yu 1986, p. 36). In both Fu Zai’s and Zhang Yanyuan’s texts, *yi* is better understood as idea instead of intention or strategy or plan. Otherwise, the painter would only need to realize his original aim and objectives by work rather than presenting and releasing them into the work. It is undeniable that before painting a painter should have a strategic intention, which might involve deciding the object depicted, considering the subject-matter or motif, setting the strategic plan for the composition, and thinking about the painting material, et cetera. However, it would be superficial and inaccurate to understand pictorial *yi* as merely the intention or strategy or plan formulated before the artist uses his brush. Indeed, classical Chinese artists favor artistic spontaneity as something between what is intentional (*youyi*) and what is unintentional (*wuyi*), and they advocate forgetting conscious intention during spontaneous creation. As the Qing painter Wang Yuanqi (1642–1715) claims when admitting his failure to imitate the Yuan master Ni Zan (1301–1374), Ni Zan’s success in untrammelled expression through painting lies in effortless spontaneity between *youyi* and *wuyi* (Nelson 1983, p. 410).<sup>8</sup>

For Kant, no aesthetic idea as intuitive representation of the imagination can be adequate to a rational idea, and no rational idea can be adequate to an aesthetic idea. Intention and strategy fall within the scope of the rational idea, and the rational idea as the counterpart of the aesthetic idea only occurs in the very beginning of the creative process of genius as understood by Kant (*KU* 5:314). This accords with my point above that intention or strategy or plan is not the understanding of *yi* emphasized by classical Chinese artists and critics. As seen above, the differentiation of *yi* from the rational idea applies not only to literature as Yu-kung Kao (1991, p. 66) argues, but to painting as well.

It should be stressed also that it is inappropriate to regard Kant’s aesthetic idea as a cognitive idea, although it can affect cognition (Matherne 2013, pp. 33–38).<sup>9</sup> Thus, due to the parallels between pictorial *yi* or *yixiang* and Kant’s aesthetic idea explained above, it is inappropriate and superficial to regard *yi* in the context of painting as a cognitive idea or meaning. I note that one of Xiongbo Shi’s (2018, pp. 871, 876–881) claims regarding *yi* (idea) in Chinese calligraphy as analogous to Kant’s aesthetic idea echoes Yu-kung Kao’s suggestion of the role of *yi* in literature, while he also agrees with Zhang Dainian (2002, p. 409) that *yi* is to be regarded as a cognitive idea. That equating Kant’s aesthetic idea with cognitive idea constitutes a



misreading of Kant's aesthetics should be noted by more scholars interested in the parallels between *yi* in Chinese art and Kant's notion of the aesthetic idea.

As seen above, *yixiang* essentially corresponds to *yi*, being similar to Kant's aesthetic idea in two aspects. How about the parallel between *yijing* and Kant's aesthetic idea? James J. Y. Liu (1962, p. 84; quoted in Gálik 1989, p. 55) translates *jing* 境 as "world" (a fusion of emotion and scene). Adele Austin Rickett translates *jing* as "state" or "poetic state," referring to an aesthetic state (fusing emotion and scene) (Wang Guowei 1977, p. 23).<sup>10</sup> Since, as argued above, in the classical Chinese aesthetic context *yi* appears similar to Kant's aesthetic idea *rather than* rational conception or strategic intention, the rendering of *yijing* as intentional mood appears to lack accuracy. I agree with Peng Feng (2018, pp. 136–137) that the translation of *yijing* as artistic conception by many Chinese scholars in the English abstracts of their papers easily causes confusion for Western scholars.<sup>11</sup> Due to parallels between *yi* and the Kantian aesthetic idea, one might suggest that *yijing* is better rendered as the *mindscape* of the (aesthetic) idea. However, this rendering seems a little redundant since, as mentioned above, Kant defines the aesthetic idea as the intuitive representation of the imagination.

Can *yijing* be rendered simply as aesthetic idea? Jiang Ronggang (2015, pp. 170–171) argues that both *yixiang* and *yijing* were used in the art criticism of Yan Fu (1854–1921), Wang Guowei, and Liang Qichao (1873–1929) at the end of the Qing dynasty as the Chinese *analogical translation* (*geyi* 格義) of the term "idea" in Western aesthetic writing.<sup>12</sup> Marián Gálik (1989, p. 60) argues that the notion of *yijing* or *jingjie* proposed by Wang Guowei receives its philosophical inspiration from Kant's aesthetic idea, claiming that "*jingjie* is precisely such an aesthetic idea [as an intuition of the imagination]."<sup>13</sup> Although in his paper arguing against Luo Gang, Peng Feng (2018, pp. 135–136) mentions Pohl's rendering of *yijing* as "Kunstlerische Idee" (artistic idea) and Gálik's argument about the philosophical origin of Wang Guowei's *yijing* in Kant's aesthetic idea, he ignores any possible correspondence between the understanding of *yijing* in classical Chinese art and Kant's aesthetic idea.<sup>14</sup>

It is worth noting that there are slight differences in nuance between *yi*, *yixiang*, and *yijing* in the Chinese texts. Although *yi* is always associated with *xiang*, *yi* stresses the image-associated *idea*, while *yixiang* stresses the idea-associated *image*. *Yijing* appears to stress the *mindscape* presenting the image-associated idea, although this *mindscape* is still essentially a mental representation of the imagination in a sense similar to Kant's aesthetic idea. That is, since the Chinese character *jing* stresses the mind as the container of the idea, *yijing* stresses that the image-associated idea (*yi*) is formulated in the artist's *mind*, and it can then be aroused in the audience's *mind* when released by the artist into the work and thus constitutes its expressive content.



*Parallels between Shen Animating Yi and Kantian Spirit Animating the Aesthetic Idea*

Zhang Dainian (2002, pp. 171, 175) explains that in the case of a human being, *shen* (spirit) refers to his “inner nature” (as illustrated in Zhuangzi’s “perceiving by spirit is contrasted with perceiving by eyes”), and *shen* or *jingshen* (essential spirit) means “the activity of the human mind.” As mentioned above, both Yu-kung Kao (1991, p. 87) and Pohl (2006, p. 133) think that in the context of classical Chinese literature the role of the artist’s *shen* in evoking artistic imagination and formulating *yi* corresponds to Kant’s understanding of spirit as the animating principle of the imagination. For Kant, spirit is “the animating principle of the mind” for presenting the aesthetic idea, and it “purposively sets the mental powers into motion, i.e., into a play that is self-maintaining and even strengthens the powers to that end” (KU 5:313). Classical Chinese texts on painting provide evidence of a parallel between the role of the painter’s *shen* in perceiving the image-associated *yi* and Kant’s notion of the spirit animating aesthetic ideas.

Guo Xi suggests that a painter should feel mentally relaxed as if “loosening his clothes and sitting with his legs spread out” and nourish in his mind a state of leisure and harmony; when “your mind becomes fully calm, upright, loving, and sincere, then [the idea-images of] the varying emotions and aspects of men, and the different characteristics of objects, will spontaneously order themselves in your mind and appear without effort under your brush” (Bush and Shih 2012, p. 157; Yu 1986, p. 640).<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Guo Ruoxu stresses that a carefree spirit (*shenxian* 神閑) is required for imaginative evocation and establishing ideas (*yijing* 意定), and also crucial for the artist to transmit *qiyun* (see Bush and Shih 2012, p. 97).

For Guo Ruoxu, *qiyun* “has its root in the carefree wandering of the spirit [游心]” (Jullien 2012, p. 165).<sup>16</sup> Only when the painter’s mind is satisfied within itself, can his *shen* remain carefree, and *yi* be established. At this moment, the imagination will not “flag,” nor the brush ineffectively “labor” (Bush and Shih 2012, p. 97). That is, *yi* emerges spontaneously in the mind, and is released smoothly into the final image, which embodies *qiyun*. Rao Ziran echoes that (the painter’s) *shen* being carefree supplies an ideal mental state for attaining *yi* in the mind, stressing that the painter should never conceive of *yi* until his *shen* reaches that state (see Bush and Shih 2012, p. 266; Yu 1986, p. 691). The valuing of this mental state for presenting *yi* can also be found in Wang Yuanqi’s claim that to release *yi* into the final image spontaneously, “one must be leisurely and carefree, without any secular concerns” and become absorbed spiritually and calm down when applying the brush to paint (Gao 1996, p. 156). It cannot be regarded as accidental that Guo Ruoxu, Rao Ziran, and Wang Yuanqi offer an emphasis similar to Guo Xi’s on the importance of the untrammled self-pleasing of the *shen* for imaginative evocation and establishing *yi*.

## *Problems with Projecting Kant's View of Genius into the Classical Chinese Context*

However, one may question the efficacy of applying Kant's account of genius' idea-giving to the context of classical Chinese painting. This is for the reasons discussed below.

### *Some Significant Differences between Yi and Kant's Aesthetic Idea*

First of all, one may note the fact that Kant's accounts of genius and the aesthetic idea are in accord with the general approach of his transcendental philosophy, while the account of pictorial *yi* in classical texts was written on an empirical and pragmatic rather than a systematic basis and in a suggestive style by numerous artists or connoisseurs who were not concerned with completing a systematic transcendental philosophy in Kant's sense.

Unlike Kant, the classical Chinese artists and connoisseurs are interested in the actual practical process of producing or appreciating art; their accounts include practical advice and descriptions with regard to producing or appreciating masterpieces. Kant is focused more on explaining the possibility of beautiful art and the working and requisites of genius in creating beautiful art in a way compatible with his account of aesthetic judgment and overall philosophical system. His aim is not really to give advice to aspiring artists, even though his account might include an occasional passing point of use to them.

One may suggest in response that when one approach is transcendental and the other is empirical, this does not mean that they cannot be compatible. Moreover, the understanding of *yi* appears also to involve a transcendental element. For instance, Qing-period critic Bu Yantu (ca. 1740), resorts to the *Book of Changes* to suggest that pictorial *yi* is like an omnipresent, universal idea: "In the *Book of Change* it is omen and all changes are predicted by it. In painting it is spirit and all manifestations of nature emerge from it" (Gao 1996, p. 136).<sup>17</sup> Bu's stress on the significance of *yi* for painting as analogous to that of an idea omnipresent within the universe implies that the painter should act like the creator or semi-creator of the universe in terms of presenting the pictorial idea in his mind and capturing the spiritual aspect of nature. However, even though the transcendental element involved in the Chinese aesthetic tradition is worth noting, we should not forget that, unlike Kant, classical Chinese artists and critics were not aiming to complete a comprehensive critical aesthetic system to replace, and synthesize the insights of, the prevalent schools of early modern Western aesthetics (the rationalism of Baumgarten, and the empiricism of Locke, Hume, et al.).<sup>18</sup>

The second issue lies in the fact that the unique expressive charisma of the idea-image as intuitive representation of the imagination released from

the classical Chinese painter's mind into a work and aroused in the audience's imagination cannot be explained by Kant's aesthetics. The *yi* established in the painter's mind and later released into a work reflects an expressionistic element above merely formal representation on the basis of its unifying representation and expression. Although Kant's account of aesthetic ideas offers theoretical support for artworks merging representation and expression, the classical Chinese understanding of the image-associated *yi* contributes to a *qiyun*-focused aesthetics in which the expressive charisma of art is markedly different from that of Western art, and reflects a perception and understanding of existence as processual.

By examining the analogies between *yi*, *shen*, and *qiyun* within the two scopes of the object and the work, we shall see that the emphasis on establishing *yi* in the mind serves for *qiyun shengdong* (through spirit consonance engendering a sense of life) as the first law of classical Chinese painting, and the innate mental talent for establishing *yi* is consistent with that for transmitting *qiyun*. Yu-kung Kao (1991, pp. 86–87) explains that as well as referring to the animating principle of generating *yi* in the artist's mind, *shen* (spirit) can be classified into another two categories: the essential character of the (animate or inanimate) object, and the expressive quality of the work.<sup>19</sup> The three categories of *shen* defined by Kao are consistent with the three categories of *qiyun*. Where the process of creation by painters is concerned, *qiyun* refers to the essential or internal reality of the (animate or inanimate) object depicted; the *qiyun* of, or in, the work refers to its expressive quality or content; and whether the artist can create a work replete with *qiyun* is related to the *qiyun* of the artist (see Hu 2016, pp. 247–268). Jianping Gao (1996, pp. 120–147) suggests that capturing *shen*, transmitting *qiyun*, and establishing *yi* all refer to capturing the internal, spiritual reality of the object.

As seen above, where the final work is concerned, *yi* as analogous to Kant's aesthetic idea appears to be the expressive content of the work which arouses the audience's imagination, corresponding to the work's *shen* or *qiyun* as expressive content. As Guo Ruoxu suggests, when *yi* informs the brushwork, the final "images [*xiang*] will correspond" to the idea, and the "spirit [*shen*] [will] be whole" in the finished painting (Bush and Shih 2012, p. 97). Here *shen* can be understood as that of the object or work, and Xie He's term *qiyun* (spirit consonance) can be used to replace *shen*. The "spirit [*shen*] [will] be whole" in the finished painting can be read thus: the final work will be replete with *qiyun*. Although establishing *yi* in the mind is just a first step, the significance of releasing *yi* into a work is analogous to transmitting *qiyun* into the work, and success in releasing *yi* into the final work contributes to and appears simultaneous with the success in transmitting *qiyun*.<sup>20</sup> As the Ming painter Yun Xiang (1586–1655) claims, "*yi* is the master of painting, and when *yi* (established in the artist's mind) is released into the final image, *qiyun* will be in the work."<sup>21</sup>

The *xiang*-associated *yi* in painting plays a bridging role in transforming the formal appearance and spiritual reality of the object into the images in the mind of the painter, and guarantees that the inner mental image “[involves] the realization of a more profound communication with the object” and also follows the artist’s “inner voice” (Gao 1996, p. 153). From Jianping Gao’s discussion of pictorial *yi* (1996, pp. 153–156), we can see that he stresses that the idea-associated image in the artist’s mind merges the spiritual feature of the object depicted and the self-expression of the artist. That is, on the one hand, establishing *yi* in the painter’s mind points to penetrating the internal or spiritual feature of the object beyond its appearance; on the other hand, the *yi* associated with the mental image reflects the artist’s feelings and emotions. Thus, *yi* preceding the brush requires the painter to be sincere to both nature and himself, to have spiritual resonance and communion with nature by contemplating it rather than gazing at its appearance (Gao 1996, pp. 137–139, 146–147, 153).<sup>22</sup> Although Yu-kung Kao’s (1991, p. 66) writing does not center on the object and its spiritual feature, which the artist aims to grasp, he explicitly indicates that in poetry through *yi* “interiority and the external world are reconciled,” and *yi* “is always the mediating element: it is aroused by either outside or inside stimuli, it is organized and integrated by the *imagination*, and it evolves into the art object.” As argued above, it is clear that this is not merely for poets; the association of *yi* with *xiang* in the mind plays a key role in motivating the expressive act of painters and in reconciling the internal mental world of painters and the external natural world.

Since *yi* is analogous to Kant’s aesthetic idea, this raises the question of whether Kant’s aesthetic idea suggests in beautiful artworks the unification of formal representation based on perception and the expression of the artist’s emotions, feelings, or thinking. Mark L. Johnson (1979, pp. 167–178) argues that Kant’s aesthetics unifies two descriptions of beauty, “one based on the perception of formal relations in an object, and the other focused on the expression of aesthetical ideas.” Samantha Matherne (2013, pp. 31–33) argues that Kant’s aesthetic idea implies the presentation of two kinds of emotions: immediate and sudden emotions and thought-connected or reflective emotions such as envy and love. Even though Kant’s aesthetic idea also offers theoretical support for art unifying representation and expression, it should be borne in mind that the mindscape of aesthetic ideas (*yijing*) established by classical Chinese artists demonstrates the unique expressionistic charisma of Chinese art that is embodied in these aspects—the aesthetic flavor of blandness along with the pursuit of the far-reaching, and the aesthetic interplay of presence and absence, substance and emptiness (see Jullien 2004, 2012).<sup>23</sup> These expressionistic features in *qiyun*-focused Chinese art reflect the classical Chinese perception of existence or reality as a process, and of polarities as harmonized.<sup>24</sup> In addition, one may suggest that unlike Kant, who separates noumenal and phenomenal nature, there is

no such distinction between two perspectives toward nature in Daoist or Confucian philosophy.<sup>25</sup> Even if the Dao may be regarded as something “above” phenomena, it penetrates phenomena, and Chinese artists seek to fulfill the Dao through their *qiyun*-focused painting. This is essentially different from Kant’s aesthetic goal of seeking an intermediary between noumena and phenomena through reflection on beauty.<sup>26</sup>

### *Some Significant Differences between Shen Animating Yi and the Kantian Spirit*

Unlike Kant, who understands the spirit as the harmonious union of imagination and understanding, classical Chinese texts on painting claim that the *shen* of the artist is required to respond to the *shen* of the object, and the artist seeks spiritual kinship and resonance with the congenial object. Spiritual communion (*shenhui* 神會) between subject and object valued under the first law of *qiyun shengdong* is not accommodated in Kant’s account of genius.

Regarding the role of the spirit as the animating principle generating aesthetic ideas in the mind, Kant stresses that the free and harmonious cooperation of imagination and understanding must play a determinate role for the “spirit” to work (*KU* 5:314, 316–318). For Kant, aesthetic taste, imagination, understanding, and spirit are requisites for genius to create beautiful artworks (*KU* 5:320). Although Kant does not deny that aesthetic judgment involves objects, the focus on the subject rather than the object in his account of genius is consistent with the focus on the subject hinted at in his account of aesthetic judgment, according to which the object supplies no objective standard for the audience to judge its beauty or identify where the beauty resides. Disinterested aesthetic pleasure and freedom are subjective, aroused when imagination and understanding co-play freely and harmoniously (*KU* 5:203–219). Although aesthetic judgment has its universal validity, this universality is intersubjective. It is not based on any independently objective standards or grounds, but rather on the free play of the subject’s imagination and understanding, and the *a priori* principle of purposiveness (assuming that the object suitably and purposively offers the subject disinterested aesthetic pleasure) (see [Wenzel 2005](#), pp. 33–34). The stress on the free co-play of the imagination and understanding in his account of aesthetic judgment is consistent with that in his account of genius creating beautiful art (*KU* 5:314–319). For Kant, the abundance and originality of aesthetic ideas animated by the spirit is less important than “the suitability of the imagination in its freedom to the lawfulness of the understanding” (*KU* 5:319). The essence of “the imagination’s free conformity to law” is a kind of “psychologically felt freedom from any form of constraint . . . [,] not just epistemological independence from concepts” ([Guyer 1993](#), pp. 286–287).

In contrast to Kant, classical Chinese texts on painting never talk about the free and harmonious co-play of imagination and understanding in a

systematic and analytical way, even though they do talk about the role of the carefree spirit of the artist in imaginative evocation and animating *yi*. Although Chinese texts lack a transcendental analysis of the productive faculties of the mind, we should not forget the distinctive point endorsed by the Daoist tradition according to which the spirit of the artist engaged in imaginative evocation is supposed to resonate with the spirit of the object. The resonance between the spirit-energy of the subject and that of the object allows the artist's innate mental disposition successfully to convey *qiyun* into a work (see [Soper 1949](#), pp. 421–423; [Hay 1983](#), p. 98; [Hu 2016](#), pp. 253, 257).

This valuing of spiritual resonance between artist and object depicted can even be found in the early painting texts proceeding Xie He's statement of the first law of *qiyun shengdong*. For instance, the artist and connoisseur Zong Bing (375–443) implies this spiritual communion with the object in his praise of “[rejoicing] in the spirit” (*changshen* 暢神), in his *Introduction to Painting Landscape* where he describes the experience of letting his spirit soar freely through art ([Bush and Shih 2012](#), pp. 37–38; [Yu 1986](#), pp. 583–584). Even though Zong Bing's description of his rejoicing in the spirit can be read as suggesting an ideal form of contemplation for *appreciators* of art (since he explicitly mentions “unrolling paintings”), later *artists* echo his advocacy of such rejoicing. Although Zong Bing's rejoicing in the spirit reflects the carefree wandering advocated by Zhuangzi and appears similar to Kant's claim of the spirit animating imagination and aesthetic ideas, it is worth noting that Zong Bing's account suggests that the spirit of the artist is supposed to respond to the spirit of the object, and the spirit of the object is the target of the spirit of the artist seeking spiritual kinship and resonance. This point can be seen in his claim that “the response by the eye and the accord by the mind to nature . . . will affect the spirit [*shen* of the artist or the connoisseur] and, as the spirit [*shen*] soars, the truth will be attained . . . . Furthermore, the spirit [*shen*], which is essentially limitless, resides in forms and stimulates all kinds of life” ([Bush and Shih 2012](#), p. 37; [Yu 1986](#), p. 583).

The text of the Qing critic Shen Zongqian (1736–1820) echoes Zong Bing's suggestion, stating that the artist's *lingqi* should express the *lingqi* of the object through his artwork, and that in creating pictures the artist's *lingqi* is like that of the *lingqi* creating things in the universe; indeed: “proceeding from the spirit [*lingqi* 靈氣], [the object depicted, the artist, and the artwork] partake of the whims of the spirit [*shen*]” ([Lin 1967](#), pp. 203–204; [Yu 1986](#), p. 900).<sup>27</sup> In praising the painter who performs like the creator or semi-creator of nature and whose spirit has infinite potential to express the spirit of the natural object, his suggestion sounds similar to Bu Yantu's view mentioned above that the artist transmitting pictorial *yi* into painting is like the creator or semi-creator of the universe endowing the object with the idea. Although a transcendental element may be identified in this account of



presenting *yi* under the play of the artist's spirit, the stress on spiritual communion and sympathetic resonance between subject and object is not involved in Kant's account of the spirit in his philosophy of art.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, centering on the innate mental talent of idea-giving, I have compared the aesthetics of the classical Chinese and Kant by examining the parallels and differences between *yi* (along with *yixiang* and *yijing*) and Kant's aesthetic idea, between the artist's *shen* and the spirit animating aesthetic ideas. As seen above, the feasibility of projecting Kant's account of genius' idea-giving into a classical Chinese painting context is supported by these parallels. First, image-associated *yi* is analogous to Kant's aesthetic idea as mental representation of the imagination, which can be perceived rather than thought. Second, like the aesthetic idea, pictorial *yi* as the internalized symbol with evocative power aroused through imagination before its manifestation in the final work cannot be understood as a rational idea (intention or conception) or cognitive meaning. Third, the painter's *shen*, which establishes *yi* in imaginative evocation, appears similar to the Kantian spirit animating the aesthetic idea.

However, due to the asymmetry between two distinctive cultural traditions, aesthetic preoccupations, and philosophical approaches, issues arise especially in relation to these aspects. First, even though *yi* might accommodate a certain kind of transcendental element, classical Chinese aesthetics written on a pragmatic basis does not aim to complete a transcendental aesthetic system in Kant's sense. Second, the advocacy of establishing *yi* through the carefree wandering of *shen* reflects the expressionistic pursuit of Chinese artists (led by the first law of *qiyun shengdong*) above formal representation on the basis of unifying representation and expression, and the expressive charisma of *qiyun*-focused Chinese painting is markedly different from that of Western art. Third, the artist's *shen* is supposed to respond to the object's *shen*, and this emphasis of classical Chinese aesthetics on sympathetic resonance between the spirit-energy of subject and that of object is absent in Kant's account.

Since the approach of Kant's transcendental aesthetics is different from that of classical Chinese aesthetics, an exact correspondence cannot be expected. That said, however, on the one hand, my examination of the parallels between the two traditions helps to illuminate classical Chinese aesthetics through the lens of comparison, and understand why earlier modern Chinese scholars adopted Kantian aesthetics to develop the modern version of traditional aesthetics. On the other hand, the significant differences seen above between the two approaches may stimulate further reflection on whether the so-called "German elements" in the modern interpretation of classical Chinese aesthetics really do signify "the othering

of self” that the commentator [Luo Gang \(2011, pp. 57–58\)](#) points to, and whether the differences undermine the analogies between the two traditions.

## Notes

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- 1 – Concerning the six laws of Chinese painting proposed by Xie He and the notion of *qiyun*, see [Hu 2016](#), pp. 247–268.
- 2 – References to Kant’s Third Critique (*Kritik der Urtheilskraft*) follow the pagination of vol. 5 of the Akademie edition of Kant’s collected writings (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1902–). I follow the translation from Guyer and Matthews, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* ([Kant 2001](#)).
- 3 – Guo Ruoxu’s text regarding *qiyun* suggests that the innate mental disposition is related to the artist’s moral character. Kant implies that genius involves a moral dimension (*KU* 5:326). The similarity or otherwise of classical Chinese views on the moral dimension of genius and Kant’s account is not my concern in this article.
- 4 – [Kao \(1991, pp. 85, 88\)](#) renders *yi* in painting as “intent” and “meaning,” but does not link *yi* in painting with Kant’s aesthetic idea.
- 5 – *Yi*’s two synonyms *yixiang* 意象 and *yijing* 意境 are key words in modern and contemporary discussions of classical Chinese art criticism. Among Chinese scholars in recent years there has been furious debate about the philosophical origin of the theory of *yijing* in classical poetry criticism proposed by Wang Guowei (1887–1927), and further developed by Zhu Guangqian, Zong Baihua, and Li Zehou in Chinese art criticism. [Luo Gang \(2011, pp. 38–58\)](#) argues that Wang Guowei’s theory of *yijing* was constructed by adopting the German aesthetics of Kant, Schiller, and Schopenhauer, and the modern theory of *yijing* is another version of German aesthetics.
- 6 – This insight supports his arguments about internalization and symbolization in Chinese aesthetics ([Kao 1991](#), pp. 47–90).
- 7 – Few scholars question the translations of *youyi* 有意 (with intention or being intentional or conscious) and *wuyi* 無意 (without intention or

being unintentional or unconscious) in classical texts. [Zhang Dainian \(2002, p. 409\)](#) classifies *yi* in classical Chinese philosophy into two categories: volutative intention and cognitive idea.

- 8 – Kant suggests that art should appear unintentional even though an intention is behind genius's creation (*KU* 5:306–307). However, the parallels and differences between Chinese aesthetics and Kant's ideas with regard to artistic spontaneity are not my concern in this article; see [Hu 2017](#), pp. 246–274.
- 9 – [Wenzel \(2005, pp. 43, 49–51\)](#) argues that unlike cognitive judgment, which requires a determinate harmonious relationship of imagination and understanding through which “the representation of the object is determined by concepts,” the free and harmonious play of imagination and understanding in aesthetic judgment merely involves a cognition in general, in that the understanding does not fix the imagination by any determinate concepts, and “the object is not even cognized as an object.” However, “although cognition is not intended in such free play, our capacity for cognition is strengthened by it” (p. 62).
- 10 – Rickett translates *jingjie* 境界 (a synonym of *yijing*) as “realm” or “sphere of reality delineated” ([Wang Guowei 1977](#), pp. 23–24) and *yijing* as “meaning and [poetic] state” (p. 26).
- 11 – Peng's rendering of *yijing* as “mindscape” might be inspired by Yukung Kao's (1986, p. 385) translation of *jingjie* as “inscape,” which is “as defined by [Jonathan Culler \[1975, p. 175\]](#), who suggests it as a ‘moment of epiphany’, . . . ‘a moment of revelation in which form is grasped and surface becomes profundity’.” [Kao \(1991, p. 74\)](#) also translates *yijing* as “inscape” or “ideational state.”
- 12 – [Jiang \(2015, pp. 170–171\)](#) mentions that similar to *yijing* and *yixiang*, another Chinese term *guannian* 觀念 corresponds to the Western term “idea.” In his translation of Kant's Third Critique, [Zong Baihua \(1994, pp. 360–367\)](#) translates idea as *guannian*. Since Kant defines the aesthetic idea as the representation of the imagination, it is interesting to note that [Zong Baihua \(1994, pp. 360–366\)](#) translates the representation (of the imagination) as *biaoxiang* 表象.
- 13 – The question of whether the main philosophical origin of Wang Guowei's theory of *yijing* is from Kant's account of the aesthetic idea, or whether he was partially inspired by Kant's thought to use the term *yijing* to construct his own modern version of classical poetry criticism, is not my concern here.
- 14 – [Peng Feng \(2018, pp. 136–138\)](#) states that he finds no term in Western aesthetics with any similarity to *yijing*.

- 15 – The story of the painter “loosening his clothes and sitting with his legs spread out” referred to by Guo Xi is originally recorded by [Zhuangzi \(2013, p. 172\)](#), and the carefree spiritual state is echoed by later artists as necessary for imaginative evocation and spontaneous creation.
- 16 – As [Jullien \(2012, p. 165\)](#) notes, Guo Ruoxu’s term “the carefree wandering of the spirit” borrows from Zhuangzi.
- 17 – [Jianping Gao \(1996, pp. 136–137\)](#) suggests that *yi* is analogous to Plato’s Idea. Whether it is appropriate to regard *yi* in the painter’s mind as analogous to Plato’s Ideas is not my concern here.
- 18 – What Kant means by “transcendental” refers to what lies beyond the limitation of knowledge gained through our experience, “with respect to the *a priori* conditions and elements of our experience” ([Wenzel 2005, p. 155](#)). Despite some similarities, the “transcendental” element of *tian* as empowering artistic spontaneity in the classical Chinese artistic context is not quite the same as Kant’s sense. There is no space for me to pursue this issue further here.
- 19 – [Zong-qi Cai \(2004, pp. 310–342\)](#) discusses the philosophical origins and aesthetic significance of *shen* in texts on literature and painting in the Six Dynasties in five categories.
- 20 – The technical issue of artistic practice relating to *yi* and *qiyun* is beyond my concern here.
- 21 – My translation of 畫以意為主，意至而氣韻出焉（惲向，《跋<山水冊>》）。It is true that there is no guarantee that pictorial *yi* or *qiyun* will be embodied in the painting, while it is regarded as a failure when the work lacks *yi* or *qiyun* (see Eugene [Wang 2007, pp. 463–481](#)).
- 22 – Influenced by classical Chinese processual metaphysics, the perceptual way that classical Chinese artists contemplate the object rather than gazing at it offers the technical basis for self-expression above formal representation.
- 23 – There is no space here to explain the expressionistic features of Chinese painting in detail.
- 24 – Concerning the dialectic of harmonization of polarities in Daoism and Confucianism, see [Cheng 2006, pp. 26–35](#).
- 25 – [Wenzel \(2010, p. 331\)](#) notes that the Dao in Confucian philosophy does not involve a phenomenal-noumenal distinction. [Simon Shengjian Xie \(2010, p. 806\)](#) claims that the Dao in Laozi’s texts is “what Kant calls noumena.” I think that Wenzel’s view is correct and Xie’s view is inaccurate but have no space to argue that here.
- 26 – For Kant, although noumena (things in themselves) are inaccessible, through reflective judgment on beauty, cognitive knowledge of an

external, mechanical nature, and the moral autonomy of inner nature find an intermediary rather than standing at two unbridgeable precipices (see Düsing 1990, pp. 79–92).

- 27 – Lin (1967, pp. 203–204) translates *lingqi* 靈氣 as “spirit”; in the context here it approximately equates to *shen*.

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